

A Comparative Study on Florence and Venice in Renaissance: Political Stability and Reasons for It

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Abstract: During the Renaissance, Florence and Venice possessed relatively dominant positions among Italy city-states. Despite the popular opinion was that the political institutions of Venice were regarded as more effective and the results were not as pleasing as Florence's, the impression of the impeccable institutions of Venice still existed. Plus, the weakness of Florence was exposed after being defeated by France, and this was beneficial for the reputation of the institution of Venice. Through this paper, historical documents and books will be utilized to analyze and prove these three statements are truly reasons for the stability of Venice from majorly 1400 to 1550, and chronology that does not be included in this range will not share a relatively huge gap with it. After discussion, this paper would conclude that during the Renaissance period, especially the early stage, Venice is more stable than Florence due that Venice achieved the success of constructing a myth of successful institutions, more influential diplomacy, and more advanced commercial measures.

Keywords: renaissance, Florence, Venice, political institutions, comparative studies

1. Introduction

“Stability” in this paper suggests the stability of structures that establish the political institution and their constituents [1]. In the comparative studies of the Italy city-states in the Renaissance, it seems traditional to consider Venice was more stable than Florence in the early Renaissance era. On the other hand, meanwhile, scholars have realized that Venice, to some extent, formed a myth to render positive impressions upon other people to regard Venice as a powerful city-state. Nevertheless, studies comparing Venice and Florence with the content about their measures to ensure the stability of regimes are still scarce. Thus, this article would attempt to initiate so with Florence by discussing the reasons for the stability of Venice via historical facts, books, and documents in order to elevate the profoundness of the Renaissance studies of city-states. Due to the various similar situations and conditions between Venice and Florence, such as commerce and political institutions but Venice possessed more stability than Florence over a century according to the chronology, it would be a meaningful topic for us to study politics. Therefore, Florence is selected to become the subject of comparative study in this paper.

2. Comparisons on Venice and Florence

2.1. Geopolitics in Venice and Florence

As for predominant city-states, Venice and Florence both advanced their concept of diplomacy since ambassadors became no longer limited to simply being in charge of regional but maintaining certain individual initiatives, such as retaining coalitions, even though the power of ambassadors is still confined [2]. This progress is helpful for communication between two sovereignties because the content ambassadors discuss would now be more representative of the affair of the central government. In such a background, both city-states applied different strategies of international relations to maximize the benefits. However, in the field of international relations, Venice performed better than Florence according to its performance in its relationships with Ottoman Empire.

To Venice and the Ottoman Empire, there is no significant element that contributes to severe conflict since they are not each other's major opponents. This claims that these two areas possess certain overlapped benefits to each other. The foremost bilateral interest is their frequent trade of course: For Venice, Ottoman possesses spice it was interested in, and for Ottoman, living goods as wool from Europe brought by Venice as the middleman were essential [3]. Hence, choosing direct war would bring nothing direct benefit to them, even if their institutions, cultural background, and religions are different at all. On the other hand, Venice and Ottoman did not possess numerous hostility straightforwardly toward each other about territory: unlike Hungary, the territorial borders between Venice and Ottoman on land are not obvious, therefore the fight for oceanic trade routes seem to be the supplement of their territorial contests at this respect [4]. Thus, it would be rare to discover that these two regimes chose to initiate war for expansion, which guaranteed the stability and independence of Venice.

Besides, from history, even when the Ottoman Empire was determined to expand its territory in Europe more, Venice also successfully protected itself from Christian-Muslim conflict. This demonstrates that Venice could negotiate two sides with satisfactory results to each other. For instance, when the Byzantine Empire encountered collapse, the Ottoman Empire became a threat to the safety of Venice after its continuous expansion, especially since this background also contained the Crusade. In such a fierce and complicated religious conflict, Venice successfully prevented the coming possible war toward itself via sending ambassadors and emissaries to lobby Matthias that it is extremely possible to invade his country and utilize the final rest of the value of the Byzantine Empire in order to obtain the support from Moskov [5]. Thus, an anti-Ottoman league would be formed which brought peace to Venice. From this action, the standard of diplomacy of Venice is exemplified: Venice avoided its land becoming the battleground and the later war toward Moldavia illustrated the worry of Venice is correct, which proves the standard of international politics in Venice.

Nevertheless, as for Florence, the scene was different since its geopolitical environment is not as advantageous as Venice's. It claims that without possessing oceanic predominance as Venice achieved in the Mediterranean Sea, Florence, which is surrounded by more little states as France and Castile compared to the Byzantine and Ottoman Empire in scale, seems to perceive less opportunity for itself to attain similar development as Venice via foreign affairs. Even more, trade, as a significant revenue source, Florence also encountered severe challenges and the influence of Venice. For example, as the major export item, textile clothing was an essential product for Florence but faced radical competition from Venice: the ability to cater to fashions and imitate clothes rendered the Ottoman Empire selected Venice as its more crucial commercial partner since the standards of the textile industry in Venice and Florence seemed similar [6]. Thus, the space of development of Venice is more limited than Venice's due to geographical differences and commercial competition, which resulted in more possibilities for instability and dependence.

2.2. Financial Progress in Venice and Florence

With the appealing and satisfying environment and background, Venice and Florence consequently created more advanced means of finance in order to develop business; therefore, it is reasonable to state that Venice accomplished better than Florence in this respect, which furtherly assisted to form more stability and independence. For instance, the banking industry in Venice facilitated a crucial role in the development of Venice. It was closely related to the government, which is beneficial for it to be supervised and cooperate with, and this statement becomes more favorable when Venice encounters war: during the Turkish war from 1473 to 1475, Venetian banks allocated and lent around 300,000 ducats as the short-term loans to the government, functioning as an approach to prepare and expand costs for the war [7]. During peacetime, the short-term loan was also utilized by the government to achieve purposes as catering and hiring other mercenaries, and because the Venetian government employed the tax revenue as a guarantee, the financial system was not injured [8]. This government-bank relationship assisted Venice in attaining more money in a relatively brief time and being capable of regulating it flexibly, and banks in developing more business, which consequently formed a double-win environment.

On the other hand, Venice introduced the earliest double-entry bookkeeping system, which is avant-garde enough for nowadays. The theme of this system is dividing credits and debits into two sections, which is the same as the behavior of ledgers might employ today, and this method successfully endowed Venice to be the standard of bookkeeping among Europeans gradually [9]. With this guidance, Venetians, especially merchants, could conduct their business and investment in a more unambiguous way. The utilization of the double-entry bookkeeping system also reflects that the atmosphere of the economy or business and the firm commercial background in Venice were prosperous during that time.

However, Florence was not as ambitious as Venice in the finance field. This implies that the banking industry in Florence was not as prosperous as in Venice. For Florence, the definition of a bank was ambiguous, which then resulted in the regulation of it being insufficient, and even though this trend would be beneficial for local cities to adjust the functions of the bank themselves, a united and reliable system did not emerge [10]. Thus, this consequently implied future issues. Due to unregulated and restless loaning to the foreign princes by Florentine merchants, various banks of Florence finally encountered bankruptcy and financial crises, such as Edward III of England, who pressured Florentine bankers to loan him for the battle in France [10]. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the finance field of Florence developed better than Venice, consequently, Venice attained more social stability.

2.3. Governing Measures in Venice and Florence

The last reason this paper considers Venice was stable originated from the plan of Venetian aristocrats as a method of governing people. This means that the Venice government was more politically mature compared to Florence. One instance would be that the Venice government successfully constructed a myth that Venice was prosperous and advanced combined with the abovementioned reasons. For instance, comparing magistrates' discretion, Venice was obviously more arbitrary and inclined toward the rich and power instead of defending common civil rights de facto: due to possessing considerable discretion, it is not abnormal for magistrates in Venice to judge the defendants with crime names they fabricate totally as long as these crimes are not named before [11]. Briefly speaking, discretion allowed the judge to sentence more directly, not related to legalisms that distanced the particular crime from its treatment. Such consequences could be traced back to the design of the institutions of Venice: the Venetian government is constituted of aristocrats and nobles, therefore in order to dominate people more efficiently and directly, they conceived a judicial system that was

majorly beneficial to themselves. Nevertheless, it was still necessary for them to justify or legitimate their brainchild as an advanced institution. Thus, the Venetian government tried to propagandize statements that praised the Venetian mode written by literati to convince and unify people since their political structure was tremendously unfair to the people [12]. Due to sensible and recognizable independence and safety derived from the navy and commerce compared to other Italian city-states, the elaborate propaganda of the Venetian government persuaded the people successfully that the political institution of Venice is appropriate and remarkable, despite the fact that Venetian institution is highly repressive to the common people. Furthermore, the Venice government guaranteed that the throne would not be possessed by one single powerful family in one section of political institution, which was resemble to the thoughts of nowadays democracy that no one branch of power shall be too powerful. This illustrates that its institution still owns merits and is not completely fabricated by propaganda. In Venice, aristocrats as a social group established a series of regulations on themselves in order to accomplish alleviating individual differences therefore the group will be stable, and the extent of potential conflicts of their interests could be decreased. For example, in the execution of the laws of 1414 and 1430, aristocrats would be treated equally by their common procedural responsibility and the ritual experience it tails while requiring them to pass the authentication of the *avogadori di comun*, which identifies that the whole noble hierarchy would now be separated from their ancestors except fathers as their legitimate source of being nobles [13]. What is more, for the further development of common traits, the Venetian government also regulated marriages to consolidate the noble hierarchy fluidity is stagnant, whereafter differences in this group will be decreased more while beneficial for blocking opportunities toward other hierarchies entering. When the *Libro d'Oro* law of 31 August 1506 passed, in order to ensure that the purity of noble blood will not be influenced by bastards and offspring of female slaves, female aristocrats of Venice were required to register their names and birthplaces (if it was not Venice). This act resulted that the marriage of noble women would be considered more carefully since their identities could directly impact the legitimacy of the nobility of infants whether would be acknowledged or not. Moreover, this regulation exerted on noble intermarriage assisted more in alleviating more conflicts between aristocrats since intermarriage, as the symbol of bounding interests and resources together, to a certain extent, prevented the outbreak of internal collisions. With such actions, aristocrats as the leading hierarchy would be united and possess more resources for regulating other governmental events, then the stability of Venice could be reinforced.

Florence, on the other hand, did not perform as impressive as Venice. First, from the perspective of political inclination, Florence erred in the description of Machiavelli. For instance, when it comes to propaganda, the overwhelming ruling Medici family of Florence utilized art to persuade citizens to be satisfied with their government, such as statues like Donatello's "David" and "Judith" that symbolize the terminator of tyranny and the protector of liberty [14]. The purpose of it was to connect Bible figures to civil society and prove that the governance of the Medici family was justifiable and legitimate. Thus, people would consider Medici as the defender or protector of Florence instead of concerning the fact that the Medici family appropriated republican spirits to its own political credit in this way [15]. Nevertheless, this approach that orients spirit does not possess continuity and the effects spread from these artworks will change as society changes. This is because every generation could interpret the same period of history differently, and as the result, politicians were easy to set history as their political goal but then failed [16]. Similarly, artworks could be concerned in the same measure, which implies that art propaganda, in this circumstance that West Europeans consider bible stories as their common history, perhaps could only be effective in one generation. When Florence was defeated by France and Medici family had to be exiled, these statues became the obvious irony and lost their influence directly.

Moreover, oligarchic aristocrats in Florence were not as organized as in Venice since the Medici family monopolized the chief position. Thence, Florence felt more difficult not to be arbitrary, which was not beneficial for uniting the whole noble hierarchy together and spelled future interior conflicts. For instance, marriage, as one of the few measures for a family to improve or maintain status and political power, was selected by the Medici family first, such as the marriage of the Strozzi and Medici families, and the other families had to choose what remained. This strategy would be harmful to the harmony of the aristocrat class since, through continuous marriages, the Medici family could infiltrate the whole bureaucracy and society, and resources of them will be more and more centralized to the Medici family, which left less and less to the other nobles and their own power of influence will be reduced gradually.

3. Conclusion

This paper illustrates three aspects of the Republic of Venice achieving more impressing on the stability of its regime compared to the Republic of Florence, and they are geopolitical, financial, and institutional. Venice owns the first access to the Mediterranean Sea and maintains frequent trade relations with the Ottoman Empire, values the banking industry and establishes the central banking system, captured the current fashion to propagandize, and is able to now allow the power to be centralized. These approaches consolidated the stability of the society of Venice, while Florence was less successful in this respect, such as lack of geographical advantage, less utilization of concentration on the finance field, ineffective propaganda, and over-centralization of power by the Medici family. These elements to some extent did not become helpful for the stability of Florence. As for future improvement, this paper would be more convincing if it referred to more data and primary sources. For future studies on this topic, more perspectives, such as the military and the roles of women, would provide a more detailed and diverse comparison between the institutions of Venice and Florence.

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